

SOME ASPECTS OF AŚOKAN EDICTS

The first Aśokan Rock Edict (RE I) never was subject of any discussion, its content is quite clear: the king severely censures bloody sacrifices and announces his sincere devotion to vegetarian principles. One passage only seems to be obscure and is to be reconsidered: *asti pi tu ekacā samājā sādhumatā devānampriyasa priyadasino rāñio* (according to Girnar version). The literal translation must be as follows: "But there are also some festivals meetings which are considered meritorious by king Devanampriya Priyadarśin"¹; "There are, however, certain festive gatherings approved of as good by king Priyadarśin, Beloved of the gods"²; "*Il y a pourtant des assemblées spéciales que le roi ami des dieux au regard amical considère comme bonnes*"³; "There is, however, one kind of festive gathering, which is considered good"⁴; "*Es gibt aber auch gewisse Versammlungen, die vom König D.P. gutgeheissen*

¹ E. HULTZSCH, *Inscriptions of Asoka*, Delhi, 1990 (1924).

² B. M. BARUA, *Asoka and his Inscriptions*, Calcutta, 1990 (1946).

³ J. BLOCH, *Les inscriptions d'Asoka*, 1950.

⁴ D. C. SIRCAR, *Inscriptions of Asoka*, Delhi, 1967.

*werden*⁵; “although there are some festivals that Beloved-of-the-Gods, king Piyadasi, does approve of”⁶.

No serious discrepancies are to be found in translations quoted above, but one fundamental problem nevertheless remains: what kind of festive gatherings, meetings or festivals the king had in mind. The general meaning of the term *samāja* is actually “festival”, accompanied by music and dances, animal fights, sumptuous feasts and drinks (cf. KA II.25.36: *utsavasamājayātrāsu caturahaḥ sauriko deyah*). According to the same Edict, *samāja* is associated with non-vegetarian food. Aśoka “sees much to object to in such festivals” (*ubhukam hi dosam samājamhi pasati devānañpriyo priyadasī rājā*), just because they are incompatible with his practice of *ahimsā*. So it is not difficult to comprehend, what is *samāja* and why “the festivals” are to be objected by the pious king.

But Aśoka does not specify the “festivals”, which are excluded from this prohibition and can be considered even as “meritorious” (*sādhumatā*). Modern scholars try to find “good *samājas*” in some other Aśokan Edicts. They assume, e.g., that “festive gatherings” can be identical with certain “theatrical performances” (*dassana, diviyāni lūpāni*) supposed to be mentioned in the RE IV⁷. It is not easy to concede this hypothesis. The king does not approve banquets with non-vegetarian food. What for he needs in this connection to make a proviso, that his disapproval does not apply to any “theatrical performance”?

Vegetarian principles clearly could not be violated during such public shows. The latter had nothing to do at all with the problem of *ahimsā*, the subject of discussion in the given Rock Edict. Aśoka’s reservation as regards *sādhumatā samājā* without any specification, which namely “festivals” are approved, seems to be meaningless. Such a proviso would be an enigma for the king’s subjects – unlike

⁵ U. SCHNEIDER, *Die großen Felsen-Edikte Aśokas. Kritische Ausgabe, Übersetzung und Analyse der Texte*, Wiesbaden, 1978.

⁶ S. DHAMMIKA, *The Edicts of King Aśoka. An English rendering*, Kandy, 1993.

⁷ U. SCHNEIDER, *op. cit.*, p.121.

modern indologists they had no chance to compare the RE I with others, later proclaimed ones.

It is useful to pay attention to the structure of the text as a whole and to analyze the position of the passage in question therein. The first part of Edict contains disapproval of bloody sacrifices and festivals, the second one is devoted to Aśoka's vegetarian practice: contrary to the usage of the past the king promises to give up in future every kind of non-vegetarian food. The phrase about "good festivals" stands just between these two parts, occupying the central position. It does not contain any proviso to the former objection of festive gatherings. Aśoka contrasts all the festivals, to be objected, with certain "meritorious" or *dhamma-samāja*, to be described immediately. Such a construction is very typical for his Edicts: "In the past times... improper behavior... has increased. But now... proper behavior ... and the sons and grandsons will continue to promote *Dhamma*-practice" etc. "One kind of festivals, which is considered good" is not to be taken in a literal sense of the word. It is metaphorical expression to denote the vegetarian practice of the king: *Dhamma*-festival consisted in his observing the rules of *ahiṁsā*.

It is well known fact, that Aśokan Edicts are not administrative documents, they are fine specimens of a literary tradition, rich in figures of speech. Their characteristic feature is the use of traditional terms in a new and unusual sense. Some compounds are built with the help of the word *dhamma*: *dhammavijaya*, *dhammadāna*, *dhammamāngala* – their meanings are far from the ordinary ones (victory, gift etc). It would be risky to interpret Aśoka's *dhammavijaya* in conformity with Sanskrit *dharma-vijaya*. The latter term is opposed to *lobhavijaya* and *āsuravijaya* (KA XII.I.IO f). *Dharmavijayī* king is ever fighting with his neighbors, following his *Kṣatriya-dhamma* only. As a noble (*dharma*) conqueror, he does not pretend to the wealth or life of defeated enemies. But Aśoka's *dhammavijaya* does not presuppose any battles at all. By his activity in disseminating *Dhamma* throughout the world the ruler becomes to be victorious, i.e. King of *Dhamma*. Such a *dhammavijaya* has

nothing in common with ordinary *vijaya* as “victory”, “conquering” something by military operations.

The same transformation has taken place with the word *dāna* – “gift” or “generosity”. It is said in the RE XI that “there is no such gift as *dhammadāna*”. It would be useless to compare this *dhammadāna* with the concept of *dharma* in Sanskrit literature. The authors of *Dharmaśāstra*'s explain, that *dharma* is nothing more, than a gift to a decent person (*śrotriya, sādhū* etc.), and not to a worthless one – a gambler, actor or prostitute (cf. KA III.16.4). Aśoka had in mind something different: his *Dhammadāna* is not “*dāna* in accordance with *dharma*”, but “*dāna* of *dharma*” itself (doctrine or morality). It is identical with “the gift of the sight” (*cakhudāna*) mentioned in the second Pillar Edict. So gift of some material object is transformed into spiritual admonition.

The RE XI, cited above, is rather difficult to translate literally, because its author deliberately plays with words as metaphorical expressions. He uses the terms appropriate for the context of *dāna*: (*dāna*)*samstavo*, *saṃvibhāgo*, *saṃbandho*, or the eulogy of a gift, its partition among the recipients and the close relations established between all the participants in the act of giving and receiving of a gift (cf. Gautama Dh.S.V.19.20; Apastamba Dh.S. II.9.10;II.13.11). All these words are compounded by Aśoka not with *dāna*, but with *dharma*: *dhammasamstavo*, *dhammasaṃvibhāgo*, and *dhamma-saṃbandho*. *Dāna* thereby was identified with *dharma* and even superseded by the latter.

So the best of victories consists in refusal from any wars, the best of gifts is nothing more, than spiritual instruction. According to the RE IX, the best of “auspicious rites” (*mangala*) too is “ceremony of *Dharma*”, i.e. pious behavior towards servants, friends or elders, not the “rites” in the proper sense of the word, but fulfillment of certain social norms (as in *Sigalovada Sutta* of Pali Canon). In the Rock Edict VIII *vihārayātā*, or pleasure-tour, becomes to be *dhammayātā*, or pilgrimage. Not rarely Aśoka uses even the same vocabulary: “In the past the kings used to go out on pleasure tours... for hunting and other entertainments (*abhilāma*)...”. But now the king Piyadasi goes on a tour to Samboḍhi and finds

therein “pleasure” (*rati*, or *abhilāma*, according to Kalinga version). In the first case *abhilāma* is to be interpreted as an amusement, in the second one it is high spiritual “delight”.

The central concept of the RE I is *samāja*, of the RE VIII – *māngala*, of the RE X – *yaśas* and *kīrti*, of the RE XI – *dāna*, of the RE XIII – *vijaya*. These and other traditional terms are to be considered as an aggregate. They reflect with remarkable completeness Vedic ideal of chief and leader. The perfect ruler of the tribal state must be martial and always ready to conduct military expeditions or to enjoy himself in hunting sport (*yātrā*). After victory (*vijaya*) the king brings home abundant loots to give (*dāna*) them to his people and to sacrifice them to the gods during magnificent festivals (*samāja*) with auspicious rites (*māngala*). The result of such a royal activity must be his fame and glory (*yaśas*, *kīrti*) forever. Aśoka transforms all these concepts with help of the term *dhamma*.

The victory, gift, religious ceremonies and festivities - everything is converted into the practice of Dhamma and its propagation. Aśoka formulated new “Königsideal” by revision of traditional ideas and terms. Using royal terminology of the times past, he resolutely changed the meanings. Contrary to the ancient legends and conceptions of some modern writers, his motive certainly never was to give up the regnal functions. Just opposite, he was anxious about legitimization of his power. The techniques used for reformulation of the Vedic concepts were the same as those elaborated in the early Buddhist texts, and *Dhamma* was an apt instrument to achieve this goal.